

‘AN ADVENTURE’  
A NOTE ON THE EVIDENCE

BY W. H. SALTER

IN THE year 1911 there was published the first edition of a book *An Adventure*, in which two English ladies, Miss C. A. E. Moberly and Miss E. F. Jourdain (called in that edition ‘Miss Morrison’ and ‘Miss Lamont’) gave an account of a visit paid by them to Versailles in August 1901, during which they saw and were spoken to by persons whose appearance and manner seemed to them peculiar. In 1902 Miss Jourdain paid a second visit, also related in the book, when she had other experiences that struck her as exceptional.

In the winter of 1901-2 they began to read up the history of the period of the French Revolution, particularly in connection with the Trianons, and later they made diligent researches in the French archives and elsewhere. As the result of their inquiries they came to the conclusion that the buildings, objects, and persons which they had seen on 10 August 1901, and those which Miss Jourdain had seen on 2 January 1902, were parts of an eighteenth-century rather than a twentieth-century scene, reproducing Marie Antoinette’s memories of a place dear to her after she had been removed from it for ever.

If these conclusions were sound, the authors had indeed had a most remarkable experience, much the most striking instance of paranormal retrocognition on record.

The authors occupied high academic positions, Miss Moberly having been since 1886 the first Principal of St Hugh’s College, Oxford, in which post Miss Jourdain succeeded her. They were highly intelligent and much respected by a wide circle of friends. Their historical researches were pursued with great ability and perseverance. The book, when first published in 1911, attracted much attention, and several editions and reprints have since appeared. It has frequently been cited in books and papers dealing with psychic phenomena, particularly when paranormal cognition of events in time other than that of the percipient is under discussion.

And yet many psychical researchers have always treated the book with a chilly reserve that found expression in the review of it in the Society’s *Proceedings*.<sup>1</sup> How is this to be explained? Certainly not on the hypothesis that the whole thing is a fake. It is plain from the published documents and from those, still un-

<sup>1</sup> vol. 25, pt. 63 (1911) pp. 353-60.



published, in the Bodleian Library that the authors believed that they had had an odd or uncanny experience, and further believed that their researches proved this to have been historically connected with eighteenth-century scenes and events, many of which were outside their normal knowledge.

In the comments that follow I shall try to explain the initial difficulties which confront a student desirous of getting a clear picture of the case, difficulties due to the way in which the experience has been recorded and put before the public. My comments are based on (a) the various editions of the book, (b) letters and notes of interviews in the S.P.R. archives, and (c) such of the documents in the Bodleian as I was able to see on a visit in 1935, and others inspected later by a friend at my request. No exhaustive review of the case is intended.

Some of the facts shortly to be stated do not seem to have been known to writers who have accepted the authors' interpretation of their experience.

It was on 10 August 1901 that the two authors first visited Versailles. Some time in the following week Miss Moberly 'began writing a descriptive letter of our experiences of the week before', and it was then that she and Miss Jourdain confided to each other that they thought the Petit Trianon to be haunted (1st edn., p. 11). This 'descriptive letter', if it could be found, would be a most valuable document, as it seems to have been the only memorandum made by either of them for three months.

Among the documents deposited by the authors in the Bodleian are some letters passing between them in November 1901. On the 12th of that month Miss Jourdain writes that she was 'beginning to put down' her account of 'our Versailles ghost-story' when a French lady told her that according to tradition Marie Antoinette and other members of her Court haunted the place: see 1st edn., pp. 21-2. (The 10th August was the day in 1792 when the Paris mob sacked the Tuileries). Miss Moberly completed and signed her account on 25 November, 106 days after the experience, Miss Jourdain on the 28th. Miss Jourdain added a note that her account 'was written before seeing Miss Moberly's account'. These are the first accounts, so far as is known, now in existence of the authors' experience of 10 August 1901. I will call them M1 and J1 respectively.

In cases of spontaneous paranormal perception one must have three 'scenes' clearly defined: (1) the *visionary* scene, i.e. the persons, material objects, etc. which the percipient seemed to hear or see during his experience; (2) the *actual* scene, i.e. the persons, material objects, etc. which were, or might have been, perceived through the normal senses by other persons at the same time and



place ; and (3) the *distant* scene, i.e. the persons, material objects, etc. which were, or might have been, perceived through the normal senses by other persons at some different time and/or different place. Unless the visionary scene materially differs from the actual scene, and at the same time materially resembles the distant scene in points not normally known to or inferable by the percipient, no case for paranormality can be made out.

Written records of experiences should be made at the earliest date practicable. Only in that way is it possible to prevent blurring of memory, especially when the experience is complex, and the risk of the record being coloured by knowledge of the distant scene acquired by the percipient between the experience and the date when it was recorded. The knowledge gained from Miss Jourdain's friend that there was a tradition of the Petit Trianon being haunted may quite possibly have influenced the authors, however slightly, in drafting their narratives.

A more serious matter is that in this particular case the visionary scene, the actual scene, and the distant scene, so far as any of the three can be defined, resemble each other in broad outline. The principal buildings, the general lay-out of greenery, paths, and ornamental water were much the same in 1789 and in 1901. It is with regard to minor changes in architecture and landscape gardening, and more especially with regard to the *dramatis personae*, that material for distinguishing the three scenes must be sought.

There have been four editions of the book. The first appeared in 1911, the second in 1913, the third in 1924, and the fourth in 1931 (reprinted 1932, 1934). The documents M1 and J1 are not reproduced in the first, third, or fourth editions of the book. In each of those editions two other accounts of the experience of August 1901 are put before the reader, which I will call M2 and J2. In the second edition,<sup>1</sup> and in that edition only, all four accounts, M1 and J1, M2 and J2, are reproduced. Members who have not the second edition, the S.P.R. copy of which has been abstracted by some unknown borrower (may this catch his eye and smite his conscience!), may compare the four narratives by inspection of the S.P.R. archives in which typewritten copies of them are pasted on cardboard in parallel columns.

It is mainly on the authority of M2 and J2 that the case has usually been judged, and it is accordingly important to know the date and history of these accounts. M1 and J1 were, according to a statement made by Miss Moberly in April 1911 to Miss Alice

<sup>1</sup> In that edition, the authors' real names having not then been disclosed, M1 is called A1 ; J1, A2 ; M2, B1 ; and J2, B2. Now that the real names have been published it is less confusing to use the initials of their surnames, with 1 and 2 to distinguish the order of composition.



Johnson, then research Officer of the S.P.R., 'written to each other, who knew every detail of the scenery', or as stated in the second edition, 'for the purpose of finding out whom we had seen in common'. M2 and J2 were, according to the second edition, 'of a more descriptive character and were written for those who had not seen the place . . . It was not until 1904, on discovering the changed aspect of the grounds, that we attached any importance to B1, 2 papers [i.e. M2 and J2]. They were copied (with introductory sentences) into an MS book in 1906, and then destroyed'.

The first point to note here is that, as M1 was written for Miss Jourdain, and J1 for Miss Moberly, it must be presumed that each read the other's first account before compiling her own second account. This presumption is, as we shall see, supported by the internal evidence, there being various points in which M2 and J2 resemble each other while differing from M1 and J1 respectively. In the advertisement of the first edition it is said that 'the book contains independent accounts by the two authors', a statement hard to reconcile with the facts.

The reason for compiling M2 and J2 is stated to have been to write a more descriptive account 'for those who had not seen the place', and this was doubtless the authors' intention. But they went far beyond it, as may be seen by comparing the descriptions of the persons seen, the second accounts varying considerably from the first. Thus the two men 'who appeared to be gardeners' of M1 become 'really very dignified officials' in M2. J1 mentions a woman and a girl seen together without describing their dress: in J2 it is said, 'I particularly noticed their unusual dress', and this takes about thirty words to describe. Next, there is the man seated by the Temple de l'Amour (or Pavillon de Musique or whatever it was); M1 described his face as 'most repulsive': M2 says 'His complexion was very dark and rough'; J1 says 'his expression was very evil', J2 adds that his face 'was marked by small-pox: his complexion was very dark'. Immediately after this is the incident of the running man, described in M1 as 'apparently coming over the rock (or whatever it was)': in M2 it is said that he 'had apparently just come either over or through the rock (or whatever it was)'. In M1 Miss Moberly 'could not follow the words he said'; in M2 she gives him fourteen words with comments on his accent, on which J1 had already remarked.

Up to this point the two authors had seen the same six persons, though not in the same order. But near the Petit Trianon building Miss Moberly saw a woman sketching, whom Miss Jourdain did not remember seeing. M1 describes this lady and her dress; M2 gives a rather fuller description, and adds that she thought 'her dress was rather old-fashioned and unusual'. Last there is



the young man (M1) or boy (J1) who came out of the Petit Trianon. M2 adds that he came out 'banging the door behind him'; J2 also adds the slamming of a door. The significance of this is that he appeared to come from the direction of a door that was bangable in the eighteenth century, but had been permanently closed for some years in 1901.

It will be seen that as regards all the eight persons mentioned by Miss Moberly, and the seven mentioned by Miss Jourdain, alterations are made in M2 or J2 or both, as regards the descriptions of their appearance or behaviour, and that the alterations are in each case such as to make it more difficult to fit the persons into the actual scene of 1901.

According to statements made in the second edition, 'B1 [M2] was dated November and B2 [J2] December 1901': this corresponds approximately with statements made to Miss Johnson in 1911. But in this matter the authors' memory seems to have been at fault. In October 1902 they wished to interest the Society in their case, and sent it M1 and J1: this is stated in the second edition of the book. These documents were examined by Mrs Sidgwick, whose brother-in-law, Arthur Sidgwick, a prominent figure in Oxford life, had told her of the case. She did not think there was enough in M1 and J1 to serve as a basis for an investigation. Had the much fuller accounts given in M2 and J2 then been in existence, it is reasonable to suppose that they would have been shown to Mrs Sidgwick, together perhaps with M1 and J1 and an explanation of the relation between the two sets of documents.

On 2 January 1902 Miss Jourdain paid her second visit to Versailles. This convinced her that the building where they had encountered the sitting man was not the Temple de l'Amour, as they had called it in M1 and J1. Her report of her January visit, and the pictures she brought back with her, convinced Miss Moberly on this point. In M2 and J2 this name is dropped and the building is described without any specific name being attached to it. The descriptions do not entirely fit any building now on the site, nor any building that the authors can show ever to have existed on or to have been projected for the site. They do suggest a composite recollection of the octagonal, closed-in building now standing on this site and known as the Belvedere or Pavillon de Musique, and the round cupola supported on classical columns known as the Temple de l'Amour, which stands on another site a little way off.<sup>1</sup> That the authors' sense of direction was poor might have been inferred from their failing at the outset of their experience to find the direct route to the Petit Trianon; see 1st

<sup>1</sup> Photographs of both these buildings are reproduced between pages 358 and 359 of vol. 25 of S.P.R. *Proceedings*.



edn., p. 3. The apparent confusion between two buildings on different sites is further evidence of this, and of defects of memory natural after the lapse of time between August and November 1901.

The destruction in 1906 of the originals of M2 and J2 has deprived us of the possibility of testing the dates claimed for these documents by observing whether they showed any of those signs, such as interlineation, change of ink, etc., from which it can often be inferred whether a document has been composed all of a piece or not. It is not very easy to follow the authors' reasoning as stated in the second edition. Documents to which they say they did not attach 'any special importance' were preserved from November–December 1901 until 1904 (? July: see p. 104 of 1st edn.,) when they discovered 'the changed aspect of the grounds'. In 1904 they began their researches in the French National Archives, the result of which seems to have been to make their narratives all the more important, and then in 1906 they copy them into a MS book and destroy them. It is such an odd sequence of events as to suggest that the authors' memory of the dates of composition of M2 and J2 had in the interval between 1906 and 1911 become very hazy. Whether that is so or not, the destruction of original documents later to be published as the foundation of an extraordinary, supernormal experience reflects oddly on their standards of evidence.

All arguments as to date would have been made unnecessary if the authors had dated *all* their accounts, first thoughts and after-thoughts, and had got an independent person to initial them with the date on which he saw them. The authors did indeed give verbal accounts of their experiences to several friends. The value to be attached to statements by persons who say they remember hearing a certain narrative at a certain time depends in general on two things: (1) the amount of detail in the narrative, and (2) the length of time between the date when they heard the narrative and the date when they state they remember having heard it.

The narrative in *An Adventure* contains a mass of details, and it is in the details that the whole point lies, whether it be descriptions of the dress, personal appearance, behaviour, and speech of the eight persons met, or the various features of architecture and landscape gardening. Several of the letters seen by me in the Bodleian were dated 1911 and 1912. After an interval of nine years and upwards, few peoples' memories of a complicated narrative are to be trusted. What is the earliest, independent, unambiguous evidence, not for *a* narrative of Versailles, but for the particular narrative set out in M2 and J2? It is for the authors and their editors to produce the evidence they rely on. Vague references to papers in the Bodleian are not good enough.



By 1906, when, the authors state, the originals of M2 and J2 were copied into the MS book (now in the Bodleian) and then destroyed, the authors' knowledge of the Petit Trianon of the revolutionary period was much enlarged. They had been reading up the period since the winter of 1901-2 and their systematic searches in French archives began in 1904.

Many people who have attempted to write out an account of a complicated occurrence, whether normal or not, which includes several incidents, will by inadvertence, even while their memory is fresh, omit details which on reflection they will wish to include in their record. It is proper to record these afterthoughts, but to record them as such, so that there shall be no confusion between them and the record as originally made. The afterthoughts should be dated and independently attested, so that they may be judged on their own merits.

There is accordingly lacking in the Versailles case what should be (I repeat, *should be*) the starting point of any case of paranormal perception, namely an unambiguous description of the visionary scene recorded in such a way as to exclude faults of memory. It is not therefore possible to effect a clear comparison of the visionary scene of this book with either the actual or the distant scene. As to the distant scene, *An Adventure* suffers, in comparison with other cases of paranormal perception, from a peculiar difficulty. In a typical case the distant scene is objective, and the circumstances composing it can be ascertained by inquiry. The percipient, say, while sitting in his office has a vision of his brother being knocked down by a car in another town. In a case of that type it is usually possible to ascertain whether such an accident has happened, and if it has, to discover just when and where and how. In the Versailles story the distant scene is supposed by the authors to represent the memories of Marie Antoinette. That supposition of the authors is not based on anything in the experience as they record it. Their diligent research enables them to say that such and such persons *might* on some occasion have been grouped together in her thoughts, but not that in fact they were. The distant scene is therefore in this case both subjective and hypothetical.

There is also much vagueness as to the third of the relevant scenes, that which has been called the actual scene. It has long been recognised that the possibilities of a normal explanation are much greater when a supposedly paranormal perception occurs out of doors than when it takes place in a room. It is usually possible to observe whether figures seen indoors come and go as creatures of flesh and blood, or appear and disappear as phantoms. The number of ordinary folk likely to be seen in a room at any particular time is limited, and the identity of any who were in



fact present can often be ascertained. A public park is, evidently, about the worst setting for a ghost-story, especially if the supposed ghosts can only be identified from descriptions made months, or possibly years, later.

No one can say what persons, besides the authors, were in the gardens of the Petit Trianon on 10 August 1901 during the time of their visit. Perhaps if they had immediately issued an advertisement inviting the man with a pock-marked face and a repulsive scowl who was sitting that afternoon on the steps of the Pavillon de Musique, (or was it the Temple de l'Amour?) or the lady with an old-fashioned, rather dowdy dress (see 1st edn., p. 75) and an unattractive face, who was sketching near the Petit Trianon about the same time, to communicate with them, some contemporaries might have come forward in the flesh claiming to answer those descriptions. By 1911 all that was possible was to consider whether the persons described were the sort of people who might naturally have been met in the Versailles of 1901.

It should be remembered that in 1901 the French were far from Anglophile, and that to them the English spinster wandering unescorted on the Continent was an irresistible joke. Perhaps it is not necessary to look further for explanations of the scowls of the sitting man (M2), the 'peculiar smile' of the running man (M2), or the 'peculiar smile of suppressed mockery' of the lad who banged the door (J2).

Were the authors right in supposing that the dress of the persons seen was not that of 1901? I shall not hazard an opinion as to whether the dress of the lady seen sketching might or might not have been worn by a woman artist in 1901, or whether it would have been 'unusual' for a girl of 13 or 14, the daughter, it would seem, of a local employee, to have worn a dress reaching to her ankles in the Versailles gardens of that period, as described in J2. 'Unusual' it would have been in the England of 1901, but not at that time in several country districts on the Continent. As to the men, the uniform worn by the 'gardeners' does not seem to have been that of any persons employed in the gardens in 1901, but is it quite certain that it was not the uniform of other minor functionaries on a visit? France is full of all sorts of uniforms, and Versailles attracts visitors from all over the country. The cloaks and sombreros (or slouch hats) of the sitting and running men were, unless my recollection of that period is wholly wrong, an attire much affected by contemporary artists.

Nothing is said by either of the authors in either of their accounts as to what any one of the five male persons, four men and a lad, wore on their legs. This is a matter in which the difference between 1792 and 1901 would leap to the eye of an observant



person. Roughly speaking the difference is between breeches, the general wear of all ranks in 1792, and trousers, the universal wear in 1901, except for special occasions, such as Court Dress or sport. The silence of the authors on this crucial matter suggests that they observed no masculine leg-wear inappropriate to 1901 because there was none to observe. If that is so, then there is a strong presumption that all the male *dramatis personae* of 1901 were persons of the twentieth century, and inferentially that the females were so too.

M. Sage, an Honorary Associate of the S.P.R., who was a Frenchman and knew Versailles well, gave it as his opinion in 1911 that all the supposed eighteenth-century persons described in the book might well have been met in the flesh in the Versailles of 1901.

I have no desire to attempt to prove that Miss Moberly and Miss Jourdain had no remarkable experience on 10 August 1901. They thought at the time that they had had one, and when intelligent people in good health think that, they probably have. There are, however, many different kinds and gradations of experiences, from vague to precise, from purely subjective to veridical. But the authors recorded, investigated, and published their experience in such a way as to leave the whole affair in an impenetrable fog of uncertainty. All this would have been avoided if they had added to their many virtues some knowledge of the standards of evidence, and the recognised procedure for conforming to them, that the peculiar subject-matter of psychical research makes necessary. Contemporary records properly dated, independent attestation, careful inquiry, before any other research was begun, as to whether a normal explanation was possible—these were indispensable preliminaries for an investigation which, in view of the nature of the experience and the conditions in which it occurred, was in any event bound to be difficult. Through their failure to take these steps, their elaborate researches, conducted with an ability and perseverance worthy of all praise, rested on an insecure foundation. Their knowledge of French literature should have reminded them of the comment made by a French lady when told of an earlier and hardly less notable paranormal experience reported from the neighbourhood of Paris, 'C'est le premier pas qui coute'.

The differences between M1, J1 and M2, J2, and the uncertainty as to the dates of the latter two documents have been discussed at length, because these are matters on which few persons who have heard of the Versailles adventure are well informed. The facts were known to the officers of the Society in 1911, but as their knowledge had been obtained confidentially, they asked the authors' permission to compare the two sets of narratives in the review which was being prepared for *Proceedings*. This was



refused, and the reviewer (Mrs Sidgwick) was in consequence severely handicapped. With the publication of the second edition, this limitation on the freedom of discussion disappeared, but the refusal having once been made, the S.P.R. could not have re-opened the case without saying things that might be considered offensive to two elderly and much respected ladies. As the book still attracts attention, the time has come when it can without offence be pointed out how two extremely able women, starting out with the best intentions, muddled their case at an early stage so completely as to make all their later labours useless : and all because they had not joined the S.P.R.! Even if M2 and J2 are allowed the dates the authors claim for them, there remain formidable difficulties in the way of accepting their interpretation of their experiences. How exact was their memory? Or their sense of direction? How sharp their powers of observation? What was their knowledge of contemporary French life? Were they free of bias in favour of super-normal explanations? These are matters to be examined in the light of the evidence the authors have given us.



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